

Louis Leloir

EGHISHĒ AND THE BIBLE: OBSERVATIONS ON HIS HOMILY ON THE TRANSFIGURATION

According to Armenian tradition, Eghishē lived in the fifth century¹ and authored the *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, which relates the Armenians' resistance of A.D. 451 against the Persians as well as some exegetical and ascetical writings, several of which were published by the Mekhitarists at Venice in 1859. The exegetical works are written in homiletic style and have a pastoral aim. One homily is Eghishē's discourse on the Transfiguration, which may be found on pages 213-239 of the Venice edition.

As early as 1924, F. C. Conybeare, a prominent scholar in Armenian studies, gave in the *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (pp. 8-17) an English translation of several excerpts from that homily: I translated it in full in French in the *Revue des études arméniennes* (n.s. 20 [1986-87], 175-207). My translation is occasionally somewhat hypothetical, for certain passages were difficult to understand and, therefore, to translate. Nevertheless, it is to that translation that I refer by the paragraph numbers I established. The pages of the original edition are consistently indicated in the margins of the translation, so that it is possible to compare the French translation against the Armenian text, which I tried to render as faithfully as possible.

I attempt first to reconstruct the narrative of the homily and the commentary on it. Then, I devote the second part to setting forth Eghishē's hermeneutical rules and his way of looking at the Bible.

THE EPISODE

Peter and the "Petrosians"

Both Origen² and Eghishē reset the episode into its previous context, but, whereas the Alexandrian scholar—at least at first moment—alludes only to the context immediately preceding it: "Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before

they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1), Eghishē goes back at once to Peter's confession at Caesarea.

At one and the same time he praises Peter and finds fault with him. By the Father's grace, Peter bore "a beautiful witness" to Jesus (para. 1) when he said: "You are Christ Jesus, the Son of God" (Matt. 16:16); but his revolt when he hears of the predicted death of Jesus: "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and die, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31) proves him to be "sick with detestable thoughts," "wavering," unmindful of the "celestial beatitudes," full of "old ties . . . with sin," rooted in "all the old turn of mind," blind with the "ancient blindness," stupid, dull witted (paras. 1-2).

Peter is thus harshly treated, like a sinner among all sinners, a sinner who is nothing without the grace of the Lord. However, Jesus is going to make him, through a real miracle, "a new man," or even "a radiant light, free of any corruptible thought" (para. 2). All in all, we can see Peter, in a very concrete and vivid way, that which Paul said of himself: "What I am, I am by the grace of God, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I have worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). But natural inferiority is, in Peter's case, of a very different kind: he is lumpish and dull witted. Paul's personality is strong, whereas Peter's is weak. Peter is a good man, nothing more, so that the miracle of grace that worked in him appears to be all the greater.

For Eghishē, Peter is "the lord (*tēr*) Peter" or "master Peter" (paras. 7, 11, 18, 22), and he calls him "great among the Twelve" apostles (para. 20). But he is so by the purely gratuitous choice of God. What Eghishē admires in Peter is not the man, whom he finds very ordinary, but God and his work in Peter.

Peter's name appears frequently in the narrative, whereas those of James and John come up only once, when Eghishē, at the beginning of his homily, quotes Mark 9:12: "Jesus takes with him Peter, and James, and John." Later, nearly at the end of his homily (para. 35), as he alludes to Gal. 2:9, he would speak of the "three pillars," that is, Peter, James, and John, but that is all. When he wants to evoke, besides Peter, the other two apostles who witnessed the Transfiguration, he names them the "Petrosians" (*Petrosiank'*: see the title and paras. 11 (twice), 14, and 27). Thus Eghishē, quite evidently, places Peter in a prominent position, while he tones down to some extent the privilege that James and John enjoyed in relation to the other apostles. This honor was less James's and John's than that of the whole group of the Twelve, those whom Christ "trained by signs and very great miracles, in order to bring you together by all means to his service, so that you too can win over other people from death to life. He made

you experienced, learned and deep, so that you may be the cause of life for the whole world" (para. 24). I may refer here to a very good essay by Msgr. Albert Descamps entitled "Aux origines du Ministère. La pensée de Jésus."³ Jesus, the author says, provides for the survival of the Church by "heirs who are the depositaries of his thought. He prepares them for the future by bestowing unsparingly upon them teachings thenceforth inaccessible to the crowds [parables], giving them guidance, and entrusting them with powers. . . . In Jesus, the psychology of a testator reaches its highest point during the Last Supper, when he entrusts to the Twelve a memorial to be recalled in the time after his death."⁴ As we see, the disciples became the future heads of the Church.

In the following pages, Eghishē often mentions, explicitly, both the "Mosesians" (Movsisiank': see paras. 13, 14, 16, 27) and the "Elijians" (Eghiyank'; see paras. 14 and 26). In the context, it is obvious that Mosesians can only refer to Moses *and* Elijah, and Elijians to Elijah *and* Moses, each used irrespectively for the other. The reason for that is probably, at least in part, that Moses is considered the promulgator of the Law, and the prophets are considered those who propounded a second reading of it, in which the essentials of the Law are cleared of their minor components. But it is also because (and I return to this subject later) Eghishē sees Moses as being himself a prophet. Though he speaks of Mosesians and Elijians, never does he speak of Jacobians or Johaniums, but only of Petrosians. The difference is worth stressing: Eghishē gives Peter a prominent place among the Twelve.

Moses and Elijah

Moses and Elijah "spoke of his exodus, which he [Jesus] was to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31; see paras. 7 and 12), that is, death and resurrection, the two aspects of the paschal mystery being for Eghishē, as they really are, inseparable from each other. But Peter did not understand that by Jesus' death "death should die and the world should live," nor that the sadness resulting from the death of Jesus was quickly to be dispelled "by the good news of his resurrection" (para. 1), and that "the One who was to suffer would be the same as the One who would rise again" (para. 2).

If Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus of his death and resurrection, it is because the entire Old Testament is a prophecy of the New Testament and must be read in relation to it. "But where did Moses," Eghishē asks, "write about the death of the Son of God? I beg you not to ask such a question. All the prophets and the Law, as well,

spoke of the Incarnation of the Word of God, of his sufferings, his death, and his resurrection. See Genesis: 'God will raise up to you a prophet from among your brothers' [Deut. 18:15], that is, in the legislation of the New Testament. When he adds 'like me' [ibid.], do not listen to him, he enjoined silence with regard to his own Law" (para. 12).

This last sentence by Eghishē is rather difficult to understand. One can grasp its meaning only by referring to what follows later in the biblical text, which Eghishē does not cite, that is, "whom you will listen to," that is, to stop listening to Moses who, from the time of Jesus' arrival, wishes to enjoin "silence with regard to his own Law."

Eghishē goes on to say:

He ordered in advance to draw near to the Lord's baptism through the Sea [Exod. 14:21-29], the cloud [Exod. 13:21-22; 14:19-20; Num. 9:15-17; 14, 24, etc.], the pillar of fire [Exod. 13:21-22; 14:24; Num. 9:15-16; 14:14, etc.], the bite on the flanks [which probably refers to the episode of the brazen serpent as related in Num. 21:6-90; the serpent would probably have bitten its victims on their sides]; the rock gushing water [Num. 20:10-11]. If you do not accept [what I say], you must at least accept [what] the apostle [says]: "The rock that followed the people was Christ himself" [1 Cor. 10:4]. Moses and the prophets announced to the Israelites the wood of the cross through the miraculous rod [Exod. 4:2-4, 17; 7:10-12, 15-20], the death of the guiltless Person through the blood of the lambs that was shed in Egypt [Exod. 12:1-14, 21-28], the power over death through Israel set free from slavery [Exod. 13:3; Wisd. of Sol. 16-19], the good news of the resurrection through the holy bones of Joseph [Gen. 50:25; Exod. 13:19; Josh. 24:32; Heb. 11:22]; dead people freed living ones from death; David the Great described to them, as well as to all others, Christ's Ascension: "God has gone up with praise, and our Lord with the sound of a horn" (Ps. 47:6).

Elijah too knew all that, for it was one and the same Spirit which spoke in all of them, and all had knowledge of the same design. One would say this with a few words, another would give more circumstantial account; but what they all said had the same import (para. 12). Moses and Elijah spoke of all that with the Lord.

Convinced as he is that the message of Moses is prophetic, Eghishē had to include in his commentary the sentence that Luke is the only one among the Synoptics to express: "[They] spoke of his exodus, which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). This sentence is quoted twice by Eghishē (paras. 4 and 12). As Professor Fr. Bovon has put it, that particularity of Luke's is an indication, among others, that in the mind of the Evangelist "*both* Moses and Elijah embody God's salvific purpose and promise," and that "*both* Moses and Elijah play here a prophetic role. They announce Jesus' departure, that is to say, his death."⁵

Like Luke, Eghishē is persuaded that the whole Old Testament converges toward the person of Jesus; but here he is above all concerned with the paschal mystery and its two aspects, death and resurrec-

tion—the first gets the prominent place in his homily. True, he recalls that, through Moses, Jesus “is teaching the resurrection of the dead” (para. 6); and this refers to the words of Exodus 3:6 that Jesus will quote in his dialogue with the Sadducees on the resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:26-27): “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” However, he speaks more often and insistently about Jesus’ “exodus,” that is, departure.

According to 1 Pet. 1:10-11, “the prophets searched and inquired” about the messianic salvation. “They sought to know to what time and to what circumstances did the indications pertain that were given by the Spirit of Christ that was in them when it predicted Christ’s suffering and subsequent glory.”

Eghishē believes that was said of Elijah, who was, he says, “carefully instructed” about “the loving death of the divinity” (para. 6) of Christ. But, since Peter’s affirmation concerns the prophets in general, we must conclude that, according to Eghishē, the same may be said of Moses, and the whole context of the homily speaks to the same effect.

Eghishē finds insufficient the short indication given by Luke: “They spoke of his exodus,” and endeavors conjecturally to specify the contents of the dialogue. Jesus, he says, mercifully allows Moses and Elijah to say everything that was on their minds, and even at great length.

Eghishē thinks that Moses and Elijah “thoroughly lamented the attitude of their race; they pitied their fatherland because of the meek offspring of Jesse (Isa. 11:1). Although there had been in the past many righteous Israelites, at that time they saw all their brothers settled in evil. They realized the time had come, the day was near, when “the expiring lamp” was to go out for them, “and the bruised reed be uprooted” (Isa. 42:3; Matt. 12:20). Secretly, in their minds, they lamented their race, for they foresaw that everything of theirs was to pass over to the Gentiles, and they were to be left deserted like a body without breath. They perceived the loving kindness of God, who does not want the loss of a single man (Ezek. 18:32). Then they made bold to interrogate the Lord, who knew the secrets of their hearts, and asked him if it was not possible to have the Gentiles saved by some other means without his dying and the Jewish race perishing. But the Lord, as he would not sadden his beloved servants, answered their question by referring to his Father’s will (Mark 14:36; para. 13).

Eghishē’s interpretation, hypothetical as it is, betokens friendship toward the Jewish people and shows how much he suffers from the

division between Jews and Christians. However, he recovers himself at once and apologizes for his boldness:

Perhaps you will say to me: How do you dare to repeat things that are not written? But I saw the Lord weep over Jerusalem [Luke 19:41], and he wept abundantly for the chosen race. It was equally remarkable that, shortly after that day he fell praying on his face, before God [Matt. 26:39] . . . with all his might, in unending fatigue, during the entire night he implored, until abundant sweat poured from him [Luke 22:44]. And at the close of his prayer, he repeated the petition of the Mosesians [i.e., Moses and Elijah]: "Father," he said, "if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me" [Matt. 26:39], and at once confided to his Father's will the examining of the situation" (para. 14).

According to Eghishē, Jesus' great sorrow at Gethsemane was his failure with regard to his people and the impossibility of seeing them granted—at least for that moment the salvation that the Gentiles accepted. There is nothing against the Jews in these words of Eghishē, but rather the painful expression of a great love.

According to the Apocalypse of Peter, the three disciples came to the holy mountain "praying. Behold there were two men on the mountain." Their faces and clothes were luminous. Then Peter asks Jesus: "'My Lord, who are they?' The Lord says to me: 'They are Moses and Elijah.' Then I said to him: 'Well, where are Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the other righteous Fathers?' Then Jesus answers by showing the three disciples, in 'the Paradise wide-open . . . the crowd of the Fathers.'"⁶ Peter's question was quite relevant, for the *Concordance grecque des Pseudépigraphes d'Ancien Testament*⁷ shows that "Abraham is called *dikaïotatos* five times, and he is the sole human being to receive this superlative. He is the preeminent righteous man, the model of the righteous. It is noteworthy that Abraham's name occurs 297 times in the pseudepigrapha, while Moses' appears only 88 times. Abraham and Moses differ not only because the first is *Abinû*, our Father, whereas the latter is *Rabbenû*, our Master, but for the reason that Abraham's personality is considered in the Jewish apocryphal tradition as being three times greater than Moses."⁸

What is the reason for Moses and Elijah being chosen? The reasoning most often given by the Eastern Fathers, and underlying Eghishē's homily, seems to be the meeting of the two covenants. A Pseudo-Ephrem says:

The prophets looked at the apostles, and the apostles at the prophets. The heads of the Old Covenant and those of the New looked at each other. St. Moses saw Peter the sanctified; the steward of the Father [Heb. 3:1-6] watched the intendant of the Son. . . . The virgin of the Old Covenant beheld the virgin of the New Covenant; I mean Elijah on the one hand, John on the other hand. He who was carried up in a chariot of fire [2 Kings 2:11] gazed at the one who lay on Jesus' breast [John 13:23-25]. Thus

the mountain became the image [*tupos*] of the Church, and Jesus there united the two covenants which the Church received. He let us know that he himself gave both: the first Covenant announced his mysteries, the other revealed the glory of his works.⁹

There is a second interpretation given primarily by Ephrem of Nisibis in his *Commentary on the Concordant Gospel or Diatessaron*,¹⁰ propounded also by others,¹¹ and was taken up again and developed by a Calabrian Basilian monk of the twelfth century, Theophanus Kerameus. According to these authors, both Elijah who was carried up alive to the heavens in a chariot of fire and Moses who died a natural death and went down into hell represent life and death, the heavens and the underworld; together they united in bearing witness to Jesus. Moreover, since the three disciples are of the earth, the said Theophanus thought of quoting Phil. 2:10: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth."¹²

According to a third interpretation, propounded again by Ephrem,¹³ but which was also John Chrysostom's¹⁴ and of the above-quoted homily by Pseudo-Ephrem,¹⁵ the presence of Moses and Elijah must be explained through the disciples' replies at Caesarea. They asked themselves whether Jesus was Elijah or one of the prophets (Mark 8:28). By appearing on the mountain between Moses and Elijah, Jesus shows himself to be, Ephrem says, "the Lord of the prophets."¹⁶

Each of these interpretations is somehow implied in Eghishē's homily,¹⁷ but none is explicitly mentioned. I wonder if we are not, in order to restore adequately Eghishē's thought, to appeal to the discourse of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles. This discourse immediately puts us into an atmosphere of Transfiguration, for the face of Stephen appears to the members of the Sanhedrin "like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15), and the discourse ends in an ecstasy, during the course of which Stephen sees "the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Behold, he says, I see the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55-56). According to Paul Emile Langevin,¹⁸ the title "Son of Man" makes, in the New Testament, "a synthesis of very different, even contrary, oracles of the Old Testament: one that refers to the glorious Son of Man of Daniel, the other which speaks of the Servant" of God, smashed by suffering but afterward fully rewarded (Isa. 53:10-11). That is the meaning of Jesus' "exodus" in the narrative of the Transfiguration. The book of Acts says twice that Stephen sees Jesus not seated but "standing on the right hand of God." According to Dom Jacques Dupont—who follows the conclusions of a study by R. Pesch¹⁹—"in the biblical, Jewish tradition, the Supreme Judge is seated when he is judging the pagan nations, while . . . he stands up and remains on his feet when he has before him, to judge them, the

sinner of his own people.”²⁰ Thus the discourse of Stephen makes us go from the death and resurrection of Jesus to his second coming, just as it is in the Transfiguration.

Stephen gives only a short account of the patriarchal period (Acts 7:2-16). He praises Abraham and mentions, as regards that age, only one misdeed, that is the jealousy of Joseph’s brothers. On the contrary, with regard to the Mosaic period, he devotes a long requisitory to stigmatizing the infidelities of the people of God. At the end of this discourse (Acts 7:52) he defies [anyone] to name a single prophet that they [the people of God] did not persecute: “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They went so far as to kill those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, the very one whom you have now betrayed and murdered.”

In his milder way, which is not the same as Stephen’s, Eghishē brings in Moses and Elijah as both being privileged witnesses of the loving kindness of God toward his people and of the repeated refusal of the latter to obey God’s calls: Their attitude with regard to Jesus is nothing new; it is a repetition and conclusion of their attitude with regard to Moses and the other prophets.

Moses and the other prophets always struggled with all their might against the indocility of the people of God; they castigated them to such an extent that the people had a great fear of the prophets, and the enemies of Jesus had not the least desire to provoke them again. “This same Moses,” Eghishē says, “is the one who in the desert slaughtered many myriads of priests [Exod. 32:25-28; Num. 16:35, 17:12-14, 21:4-6] and, by his order, the earth opened up and swallowed their bands [Num. 16:31-33; Ps. 106:17-18; Sirach 45:18-19]. The priests are no less ignorant about Elijah; they know that, if they happened to become angry with him, he would be able to tie up the skies and deprive them of rain [1 Kings 17:1-7, 18:1, 41-45], and if they were to dare more, he would cause fire to come down from the skies and burn up the enemies of truth [2 Kings 1:9-12]. By many instances, they came to know his dreadful power, that is to say, the power not only of the priests mentioned above but also of their pagan adversaries, for they could not forget how Elijah himself, with his own hands, slaughtered eight hundred of their priests at the Kison torrent (1 Kings 18; para. 8).

To be sure, the harsh dealings of Moses and Elijah, as reported by Eghishē, were prompted by love. They aimed at mending the faults of a people who would walk the straight path before God only if they are cudgelled from time to time, since words of exhortation or even loving acts were not always sufficient to move and convince them. However, the results of these deeds by the prophets were dreadful.

Beyond the discourse of Stephen, we meet again the parable of the murderous vinedressers (Matt. 21:35-45), at the end of which Matthew says that "the Chief priests and the Pharisees" clearly felt threatened (Matt. 21:45). Moreover, we may recall the song of the vine in Isa. 5:1-7: "Could I do for my vine more than I did? I was expecting from it fine grapes. How is it that it produces but bad ones?" (Isa. 5:4). This complaint evidently refers only to a portion of the people of God, for God had promised Elijah, who had been discouraged by his successive failures: "I will leave a remnant in Israel" (1 Kings 19:18). Eghishē the Armenian makes a similar remark in his homily (para. 13).

What neither Eghishē nor Stephen say, and should no doubt be added here, is that the infidelities of Israel were each time a step closer toward a greater love and a renewal of the covenant. Through falls and recoveries, the people of God were purifying themselves and maturing little by little, thus hastening providentially and progressively the first advent of Jesus. "The great Abraham" (para. 10), as Eghishē calls him, keeps himself in any event beyond and above these controversies. He sovereignly dominates them by his vision of the Day of Jesus: "He saw it and was carried away by joy" (John 8:56). He also dominates them, Eghishē says, because of the strong impression and the reflective thinking which the apparition at Mamrē produced in him: "He saw three men and thought only of one; he thought only of one and talked with three; those who appeared were men, and he thought about God" (para. 10). Thus Abraham has nothing to do with this, whereas the presence of Moses and Elijah is extremely significant.

Transfiguration and the Second Coming of Jesus

From the very beginning of his homily, Eghishē makes a connection between the Transfiguration and the coming back of Jesus in glory. He says that Jesus showed the disciples "in brief in the present the semblance of his second coming, as he says with unfeigned testimony: 'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God, for it will come and arrive with power.'" (Mark 9:1; para. 3). This is indeed the promise that directly introduces into the three Synoptics the Transfiguration narrative. But while this episode leads us to the second advent of Jesus, it also announces, according to Eghishē, that thanks to the paschal mystery, all the intermediary stages and events are themselves transformed or even transfigured. If by the death of Christ death has died and the world lives (para. 1), then suffering and death are open to the hope of resurrection and to the certainty of a recom-

pense (paras. 3 and 5). "The gates of death" are broken (para. 5) and the grievous specter of decomposition gives place to the certainty of a marvelous and eternal life, which begins by departing from here below in faith: "The light momentary affliction is preparing for us, beyond all comparison, an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17).

It is said in Genesis 28, apropos of the dream of the ladder, that Jacob "met the spot." The Hebrew text uses the article, *hommaqôm* (the spot or place) because the spot concerned is a definite one, where God is especially present. Jacob will indeed call it Bethel, that is, "God's house, and", he will add, "gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17, 19). Some rabbis say that this spot is God himself, for he is the spot of the world, the spot to which he must go, without the world being his spot, since he is not limited by the world, being greater than it.²¹ Eghishê says the same thing: "The Kingdom is the true spot, since the consubstantial Trinity is wholly there. . . . For the Kingdom is really where the Godhead makes his appearance" (para. 6). The world is sacred because it is the work of God but it has been soiled by sin. However, its sacredness was in some way recovered by the Incarnation and the paschal mystery, with the hope that final sacredness will be attained at the end of time. All creation, as St. Paul wrote to the Romans, is waiting "in hope, because it will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the liberty and glory of the children of God. We know, indeed, that creation has been groaning unanimously (*sustenadzei*) and endures in common the travail of childbirth (*sunôdinei*)" (Rom. 8:20-22). Thus, as Eghishê puts it, from the death of Christ "all goods overflow to the world" (para. 7).

The spot where Jacob was granted a theophany became the sanctuary at Bethel. The mountain at the top of which Jesus appears to the three disciples—which was Mt. Tabor, according to Eghishê (para. 35)—has likewise been sanctified. This is a first viewpoint: "I love the habitation of thy house, and the place where thy glory dwells" (Ps. 26:8). "I am going to the wonderful Tent, to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival" (Ps. 42:5). "How lovely are thy dwelling places" (Ps. 84:2).

At first sight, the viewpoint of Jesus seems not to be different. We are told much in that regard by St. Luke, the Evangelist of prayer. Is it not in the context of the Temple that his Infancy Gospel begins? The birth of a child is announced to Zacharias in the sanctuary, while he is serving as a priest (Luke 1:5-22). After Jesus was born, when the purification of Mary was complete, Jesus is presented to God, his Father, in the Temple (Luke 2:22-38). At twelve, he is led again to the Temple "for the feast of the Passover" (Luke 2:41). Then he lingers there, to the wonder of his father and mother. The reason is that he

feels to be *en tois tou patros mou* (Luke 2:49): a phrase rather difficult to translate, which is interpreted by Fr. Spicq, after Origen, Epiphanius, Cyril of Alexandria, and Augustine, as meaning "chez mon père" (in my Father's house),²² and by Professor Bovon as "im Bereich meines Vaters, bei meinem Vater."²³ Thus, from the beginning of his Gospel, Luke makes a close tie between Jesus and the Temple. He knots it again at the end, as an inclusion. Of the three Synoptics, he is the only one who says, with regard to the last days of Jesus in the Temple: "Every day he was teaching in the Temple, but at night he went out and spent the night on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the Temple to hear him" (Luke 21:37-38). Moreover, Luke's Gospel ends with the sentence: "And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the Temple blessing God" (Luke 24:52-53). If the sentence is not purely editorial, it is at least the echo of a tradition: the immediate reaction of the disciples cannot be explained without the custom acquired from the example and teaching of their Master who frequently went to the Temple not only to teach but also to take part in the worship of a praying congregation or to honor, by a secret and intimate prayer, the special presence of his Father in the Temple.

Thus, the place where his Father was officially worshiped mattered very much to Jesus. However, as he stood before that sanctuary, the building of which had taken forty-six years, he said: "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." . . . "But he spoke," the Evangelist says, "of the temple of his body" (John 2:19-21). Jesus will replace the stone-built Temple by his own body, which he will offer up in sacrifice. Thus the one who sacrifices himself is always in the temple of God, for he is incessantly united to Jesus' body, which has become our first, main sanctuary. Moreover, Jesus made comforting promises with regard to prayer in the secret of one's room (Matt. 6:6). Besides that, praying during the nights spent on mountain-tops or in solitude, he blessed and sanctified praying in the midst of nature or in the desert. The greatest prayer of his life, that of the sacrifice on the Cross, was offered, as St. Leo admirably says, on the altar not of the Temple but of the world.²⁴ The monk Silouane speaks to the same effect. He says: "They worship in the churches, where the Holy Spirit has his dwelling; but your soul, too, must be the church of God. To the one who prays ceaselessly, the whole world becomes a church."²⁵

That is why Eghishē blames Peter anew because he would pitch a tent for Christ:

Did you not render the fair testimony and confess Christ as the Son of God? (Matt. 16:16). Well, you have confessed God, and you would have him dwell under a tent! . . .

Have you no respect for his majestic glory? You would reduce to poverty the Lord of the worlds, and you think he could be contained in one and the same place! Learn he is himself the place of all and he takes away the poverty of all. He appeared to you not from a place, but your own place became majestic by him (para. 20).

All in all, we are led back to what Stephen said in his discourse: "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by the hands of man" (Acts 7:48). Paul will speak likewise in his discourse at Athens (Acts 17:24), but he will not quote Isaiah 66:1-2, as Stephen had done: "Heaven is my throne and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" (Acts 7:49-50).

The Creative Splendor

According to Eghishē: Our Lord, who is himself and in himself above heavens, appeared not as a fiery nature spreading terror among corporeal beings, but as an exquisite and creative light, in order to give the heirs of the Kingdom the places usually reserved to incorporeal beings. He appeared that way, and, by his uncreated nature, he went so far as to have his servants identically glorified, for if they were not so, they could not come to the universally "consuming fire" [Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29]. The Petrosians, who contemplated the divine glory, were transported in rapture to the heights, far away from the heavy corporeal realities; they reached the spiritual dwellings of the angels. They stood well above death, for they had arrived beyond it. Like Christ, Moses and Elijah and because of them, they no longer feared death; on the contrary, they got the power to cast out death far from men in many places and circumstances, so much their poverty had become enriched. They went up to the mountain fearful and ended up finding themselves above all fear. They went up to the mountain as with a Son of man, but there they saw the same as the Son of God. They went up to the mountain as unlearned, but there they learned perfect knowledge. They went up to the mountain with the One they knew was born of a virgin, but there they understood he was born of the Father before the worlds. They went up to the mountain with the One who had been baptized by John, but there they saw him dwelling in the beams of the inaccessible light of his glory. They went up to the mountain with the One who was tired when walking on foot, but there they looked at the One who sits enthroned "on the chariot of the Cherubs" [1 Sam. 4:4; Sirach 49:10, etc.]. They went up to the mountain with the One who was threatened with death by the Jews, but they recognized him as the One who "rules life and death" [Wisd. of Sol. 16:13]. They went up to the mountain with the One they had entreated not to surrender to death, but they understood that, if he would not go down to the realm of the dead, the Abrahamians [i.e., the sons of Abraham] could not rejoin the Mosesians (para. 27).

This long excerpt from Eghishē is assuredly beautiful; however, it leaves us somewhat perplexed, for it has little to do with the real behavior of Peter and the other disciples during the Passion of Jesus. The disciples would be as described by Eghishē only after the Pentecost. At the time of the Transfiguration, they received only the seed of the grace Eghishē attributes to them. The passage quoted above

belongs to the prophetic genre more than to an account of real facts.

Again according to Eghishē, the disciples are *t'mbreak'* (para. 9), a word that means benumbed, asleep, drowned in a torpor. The word may have been borrowed from the first Armenian version of the Gospels; the second version, in the Zohrab edition, has *tsanrats'ealk'*; that is, heavy with sleep. The term used in the first version is quite appropriate; we are dealing with a torpor caused by awe, before the splendor of the glory in which Jesus appears: "The moment was extremely impressive," Eghishē says, "for human nature was unable to grasp ecclesiastical nature. . . . Nobody could find fault with the disciples for that. . . . Rightly the Scripture calls them 'benumbed' as they see the One whose power is such as to have the mountains dissolved, the abysses get dry, and all the fertile lands shaken, and moved from their foundations" (paras. 9-10).

It is astonishing and regrettable that Eghishē has hardly one word (para. 9) about the voice of the Father: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7). If he considers the Transfiguration as being one of the major events of the Gospel, it was not enough to connect it with the subsequent paschal mystery and the second advent of Jesus as well as with the previous scene at Caesarea. It was important, furthermore, to relate it to the baptism of Christ in the Jordan. The proclamation at the baptism and the one at the Transfiguration make an *inclusio* or a frame, the former introducing Christ's ministry and the latter bringing to it, just before the Passion, the seal of the Father's approval.

That the two scenes are parallel has been very well underlined by John II of Jerusalem (386-417). On the one hand he reminds us that from both sides Luke presents Jesus in prayer (Luke 3:21, 9:28). On the other hand, at the baptism a "new Elijah" appears; at the Transfiguration we meet "the former Elijah renewed." Moreover, just as at the baptism, Jesus "was not purified by the water, but he rather spread his own sanctity upon it," similarly, by his praying at the Transfiguration, "he did not receive mercy and welcome, but he rather let them be received, by granting his mercy to those who pray for it."²⁶

Then Jesus charged "the disciples on no account to relate to anyone the great epiphany they were granted" (Matt. 17:9; para. 28). What was the reason for that? In Eghishē's opinion, Jesus preferred that the disciples proclaim by a change in their life, by a real conversion, that they were gratified by the mercy of the Lord (para. 28): that turning point in their life would be more useful for them, more profitable for those with whom they lived, than any report on the marvel they had witnessed. Moreover, Jesus wanted to guard them from the temptation of boasting "about the very great miracles that had occurred and

they had contemplated" (para. 28). Finally, as the Lord "beforehand had taught the Apostles: 'Give not, he said, holy things to dogs, and cast not your pearls before swine'" (Matt. 7:6; para. 30); for the apostles "walked in the midst, not of friends, but of enemies . . . of sly, misinterpreting persons" (para. 28). Would not talking about such an experience mean debasing it? "As soon as it is described by words, the apparition falls down to the rank of a corporeal appearance. Now celestial glory goes far beyond the latter, beyond men, beyond angels" (para. 29).

EGHISHĒ'S HERMENEUTICS

Eghishē's writing is not a didactic commentary; consequently, it would be a mistake to find fault with it for not being complete. There are, in fact, some lacunae in it; for example, the obvious connection of the "bright cloud" of Matt. 17:5 with the pillar of cloud or fire of Exodus 13:21-22 should have been stressed: "The Lord himself walked at their head; a pillar of smoke during the day, to open the way for them—a pillar of fire at night, to light their way; thus they could walk day and night." Eghishē refers to this text (para. 20), but without commentary. This pillar of smoke and of fire was like a sign and a promise, for the people of the exodus, of the presence, the protection, and the guidance of God. The repetition of the miracle during the Transfiguration has an identical meaning. In the new exodus that begins with the Passion of Christ and will only end with his coming back at the end of time, God will always be with his people, ceaselessly protecting and leading them. This echoes Jesus' promise as they are reported by the Evangelist Matthew: "The power of death shall not prevail against [my church]" (Matt. 16:18), and, "Lo, I am with you all days, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

It was already said that the Transfiguration should have been paralleled with the baptism of Christ. It should be added that the distinction noted and developed between the sanctification of a definite place, Thabor, and that of the universe remains very much implicit with Eghishē.

Moreover, the sentence "they saw no one but Jesus only" (Matt. 17:8) may have called for a comment, for to the one who wishes spiritually to read the episode, these last words will express an obvious consequence of Jesus' penetrating presence: the one who experienced it sees Jesus in everything and everywhere. He sees him acting within him, present in all his brethren, penetrating all hearts and governing every event and element of the world.

Eghishē reads the Scripture in a midrashic manner, and his reading

has the qualities and limits of the genre, including the risk of indulging in hazardous conjectures. That is what Eghishē sometimes does, for example, when he surmises that Elijah wishes to become Jesus' companion on the gibbet; but Jesus refused, Eghishē says, because he wished "that no just man should be crucified with him"; he would accept that only from sinners (para. 15). A fancy that would not upset Eastern people but would perhaps look rather strange to a Westerner.

Throughout the whole Scripture, it is one and the same spirit who is speaking, and all the biblical writers "say again and again a thing of the same meaning," Eghishē says, but everyone in his own manner (para. 12). "The divine Scriptures do not lie, even where they look enigmatic" (para. 35). Sometimes they are really so, and in that case it is fitting that Christians "raise questions and problems about the hidden sense of the word they are reading in the holy Testament" (para. 31). God "speaks in parables with his prophet servants," but when he "brings in prominent witnesses" such as Moses and Elijah, he does still more, for he then expresses himself "with humility and more concretely" (para. 36).

In spite of some mild criticisms of the homily of Eghishē the Armenian, it is to be acknowledged that it is really beautiful. Eghishē explains the Bible by the Bible; he is always anxious to stress the harmony of both covenants with each other, and the prefigurative role of the first. He seeks to know the hidden sense of the words and events, and wishes to lead his hearers and readers by his comments to Christ. True, he speaks too little of the Father's voice at the time of the Transfiguration, but he invites us to listen to it "passionately" (para. 20), and we may be sure he himself did so. His soul is burning with faith, his speech is effortless, poetic, and his imagination is overflowing. Furthermore, in the realm of hermeneutics, he effectively points out a phenomenon usually overlooked, fundamental though it is.

THE NON-SCRIPTURE

Eghishē makes a distinction between Scripture and non-Scripture (para. 26), for there are "words that are incapable of being expressed, which man is not allowed—nor is he able—to utter" (2 Cor. 12:4; para. 30). Moreover, Eghishē notes that "unlettered people gave themselves up to the love of the Son of God. They have grasped the Scriptures in all their truth, and nothing has escaped their mind of the unwritten Law of God. . . . All the saints talk with God without using words, and they hear his will without a voice sent from above. They are unable to write down what they wish to say and what they hear, but, through their virtuous works, they let the unwritten Law of God be known" (para. 32).

We touch upon a delicate problem here. The people who are illiterate or almost so, unable in any case to write a letter without mistakes, and, sometimes, unable to address it legibly, have full rights of citizenship in the Church, but they have no Bible, and consequently they do not read it. The same may be said of the many Christian people, particularly the less intellectual and the poor, which is to say, in all practicality, the majority of the believers: they know the word of God only through its liturgical proclaiming and the homiletic commentary they receive. The most pious will memorize such or such a prayer from the Psalms or a biblical text that they have not read but have heard. It is obvious that one will try, as much as possible, to give to all of them easy access to the Bible. On the whole, however, the truth is that there will be little change for many people of God: the Bible will remain for them a nearly unattainable book. There are unquestionably holy people among them, saints without having purchased the Jerusalem Bible, and without knowing, a fortiori the Greek-Latin New Testament edited by Nestlé-Alland or Kittel's Hebrew Bible.

Fortunately, there are other ways to learn God's Law than by means of the written documents. St. John Chrysostom, whose many works have been translated into Armenian, tells us in the very beginning of his commentary on Matthew²⁸ that "we ought not to need the help of the Scriptures. We ought to lead a life so pure that the Holy Spirit's grace takes the place of any book for our souls. In the same way as books were written in ink, our hearts should be moulded by the Spirit. But since we have spurned that grace, well, let us welcome at least the second navigation (*ploun*). By his words and deeds, God has indicated that the first navigation was the best one, for he did not speak through an intermediary, but himself through himself (*autos di heautou*) to Noah, and Abraham, and his "first" descendants, as well as to Job and Moses, for he found their spirit to be pure. But when the whole Hebrew people sank into an abyss of wickedness, then, finally writings and tables 'of the Law' were needed to remind them."

That was the state of things before the Decalogue. God trained the patriarchs and his people by direct intervention and sometimes during dreams, by suggestions and directions to which, in their simplicity and generosity, our patriarchs were faithful. It is curious that John Chrysostom speaks that way just at the moment he begins a commentary on one of the books of the Bible. He seems to say: "I would prefer a thousand times that, instead of listening to me, you would listen directly to the words of the Bible, or even instead of hearing the Bible, that you could come directly into touch with God." John Chrysostom defines his role which he must carry out, but if

we were more passionate, more attentive to the voice of God in our hearts, books and commentaries would no longer be necessary.

So far John Chrysostom was speaking about the Old Testament, but he says the same about the New:

To tell the truth, God gave nothing written to the Apostles, but instead of writings promised them the grace of the Spirit: "That, he says, will teach you all things" [John 14:26]. And to convince you that this is far better, listen to what he says through the prophet: "I will lay down for them a new covenant, in such a way that my laws will be put into their minds and written on their hearts, so that all of them will be taught by God" [Jer. 31:31, 33-34]. Paul likewise shows that superiority, when he says the faithful have received the Law "not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of flesh, that is on your hearts" [2 Cor. 3:3]. That is because in the course of time some went astray in the realm of doctrine, while others did so in life and morals, so that it was again necessary to have recourse to the Scriptures.²⁹

According to what both Jesus and Paul have said, the Scripture should be even less necessary to Christians than to the Jews, since the main feature of the new Law is that it lies inward: "You are obviously a letter from Christ, delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God" (2 Cor. 3:3). To be sure, the New Testament is an extension of the Old Testament; however, the new Law is less a Law written on tablets of stone than a Law written on the very heart of man. The import of the Book is but relative; the word of God is less the Scripture than Jesus Christ himself. Moreover, St. Paul has foretold the day when "prophecies . . . will pass away . . . tongues will become silent . . . knowledge will pass away" (1 Cor. 13:8). And Eghishē says that "even the Scripture is transitory" (para. 26). About a century before Eghishē, St. Augustine developed the same idea in magnificent terms in his 35th *Tractatu in Iohannem* (para. 9): "When our Lord Jesus Christ comes again . . . then, in the presence of such a light, lamps will no more be needed, no prophet will be read again, the Apostle's book will not be opened, John will no longer be called to witness, so that even the Gospel will be of no use any more."³⁰ All the Scriptures will be taken from us.

In the eleventh century, St. Bruno (1035-1101) writes to his Carthusian sons: "Although you are unlettered, the Almighty God imprints on your hearts not only love but the knowledge of his holy Law, so that you manifest by your deeds what you love and know. . . . Therefore, it is evident that you have wisely picked the excellent, quickening fruit of the divine Scriptures."³¹ These monks did not read much, and some among them were even illiterate, but divine grace came to make up for that which would normally have been obtained by reading the Scriptures. The means we have to be nourished by the Bible should not lead us to lose sight of the fact that, while

this direct contact is an exceptionally fruitful way of approaching God, God might deprive us of it without our losing God himself; for he is high above all words and writings.

I conclude with a sentence by Eghishē, which, brief as it is, expresses very well the faith he was inspired with when explaining the narrative of the Transfiguration: "The words of this discourse are not a parable given as an example, as in the case of the rich man in hell or Abraham and Lazarus in the kingdom (Luke 16:19-31), but it is a revelation of things to come" (para. 34).

ABBAYE ST-MAURICE
CLERVAUX, LUXEMBOURG

NOTES

1. See P. Ananian article "4. Elisée (Elise)," *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastique*, 15 (1963), cols. 232-235. Later dates, such as sixth or seventh centuries in which Eghishē lived, have been proposed by other scholars (see the introduction to the English translation by Robert W. Thomson, *Elishē, History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 5 (Cambridge, MA, 1982), pp. 22-23.

2. See Origen, pp. 13-34; also *Joie de la Transfiguration d'après les Pères d'Orient*, Textes présentés par Dom Michel Coune, Spiritualité Orientale 39 (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1985).

3. *Revue Théologique de Louvain*, 2 (1971), 3-45; 3 (1972), 121-159.

4. *Ibid.*, 2 (1971), 4. On page 13 in the same volume we read, here given in English translation from the original French: "According to Luke 6:2, the appointing of the Twelve came after Jesus spent a night praying on the mountain. One might think such an episode was constructed by Luke, as he wished to provide a model for the heads of communities and to recommend to them that they should pray before they select auxiliaries. But it cannot be denied that the episode is historically plausible." See also 3 (1972), 121.

5. Fr. Bovon, *L'oeuvre de Luc: Etude d'exégèse et de théologie*, Lectio divina, 130 (Paris, 1987), p. 78.

6. See *Joie de la Transfiguration*, p. 3.

7. Published by A.-M. Denis in series Concordance, Corpus des textes, Indices of the Collège d'Erasmus (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, 1987).

8. L. Leloir, "Une nouvelle réalisation du CETEDOC: La Concordance grecque des Pseudépigraphes d'Ancien Testament," *Revue d'Histoire ecclésiastique*, 84 (1989), 99-100.

9. *Sancti Patris nostri Ephraem Syria Opera omnia quae extant graece, syriace, latine*, Vol. II (Rome, 1743), p. 44. See also *Joie de la Transfiguration*, p. 102.

10. Ephrem de Nisibe, *Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant ou Diatessaron*, Introduction, translation and notes by L. Leloir, Sources Chrétiennes (121), XIV, 6, p. 245.

11. See John Chrysostom, *Homily 56 in Matthaem*, 2, Patrologia Graeca, 57-58, cols. 550-551.

12. *Joie de la Transfiguration*, p. 227.

13. Ephrem de Nisibe, *Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant ou Diatessaron*, XIV, 8, p. 246.

14. John Chrysostom, *Homily 56 in Matthaem*, col. 550.
15. *Sancti Patris nostri Ephraem Syria Opera omnia*, p. 42. See also *Joi de la Transfiguration*, pp. 99-100.
16. Ephrem de Nisibe, *Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant ou Diatessaron*, XIV, 8, p. 246.
17. See paras. 1-2, 6, 10, 12-14, and so forth.
18. "Etienne, témoin du Seigneur Jésus. Ac 7, 57-60" in *Assemblés du Seigneur*, 29 (Paris, 1970), p. 23.
19. "Die Vision des Stephanus, Apg 7, 55-56" in *Bibel und Leben*, 6 (1965), 92-107, 170-183. The same theme is presented in more developed form in *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien*, 12 (Stuttgart, 1966).
20. *Nouvelles Etudes sur les Actes des Apôtres*, *Lectio divina*, 118 (Paris, 1984), p. 245.
21. From an address given by Dr. Emmanuel Bulz, Chief Rabbi of Luxembourg.
22. C. Spicq, O.P., *L'Épître aux Hébreux I* (Paris, 1952), p. 105 n. 1.
23. *Das Evangelium nach Lukas 1, Lk 1:1-9, 50*, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, III/1 (Zurich, 1989), pp. 152 and 160.
24. *Sermon 59 sur la Passion*, 8, c.5, *Sources Chrétiennes*, 74, pp. 112-113.
25. Silouane, *Spiritualité Orientale*, 5 (Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1969), p. 30.
26. See *Joie de la Transfiguration*, p. 69.
27. John Chrysostom, *Homily 1 in Matthaem*, *Patrologia Graeca*, 57, col. 13.
28. *Ibid.*, cols. 13-14.
29. *Corpus Christianorum*, Latina, 36, p. 322.
30. *Patrologia Latina* 152, 419 AB.
31. "Une lettre à ses fils chartreux" in *Patrologia Latina* 152, col. 419 AB.